

RUNNYMEDE UNITED CHURCH
THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
January 17, 2010
'The Wedding Guest'
Isaiah 62: 1-5; John 2: 1-11

After the Tsunami, Dec. 26, 2004, then Moderator of the United Church, Peter Short, wrote:

'I cannot speak for God, although I have spent many years trying to listen for God. What I hear today is the sound of weeping. What I taste today is the salt of God's tears. What I remember today is a day, we call it Good Friday, when God's sun went down while it was yet day. What I know today is that if there is a presence in all creation that is crying, that presence is God.

I have come to believe that God's ultimate commitment to the world and its creatures is not a commitment to control but a commitment to love. I believe that between control and love God must have had to make a choice. This is the same choice we all make. My own life as a parent of four has taught me this." ⁱ

Perhaps Margaret Atwood was right to say that we see the world most clearly when we see it through tears. As our tears form, how do we hear the passages from today's scriptures?

In the passage from Isaiah 62, exiles from Israel have returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. Others elected to stay in what had become a comfortable home rather than a place of banishment. For the remnant returning, the work of restoring barren ruins, once a glorious vision, seems overwhelming. Disputation, rather than celebration, is the order of the day.

Like them, we encounter times when we feel 'forsaken and desolate', in Isaiah's words. Those we love may hurt us or may feel pain we can't heal; we may grieve great loss, terrible disaster, even feel that God seems absent. Ruins of relationship, health, security may seem beyond hope of restoration.

But to people who are forsaken and desolate, indeed to all of us, comes God's promise: "You shall have a new name, a new identity – a new chance!" And what wonderful biblical names they are: in the original Hebrew "Hephzibah" means "my delight" and "Beulah" means "joined in intimate relationship".

"Beulah" is a name ringing with God's promise. No wonder black slaves in the southern US, singing of a land of justice and freedom in spirituals, called it '*Beulah Land*'. No wonder John Bunyan in *Pilgrim's Progress* called the land beyond

Death's Shadow, where birds are always singing, '*Beulah*'.

Name changes were common in Hebrew Scriptures, signalling a new identity, a new chance for life. God, making a covenant with Abram and Sarai, changed their names to Abraham and Sarah: 'Father of Many', 'Princess'. After their grandson, Jacob, wrestled with the divine form, God changed his name to Israel, meaning 'Who Struggles with God'. God changed their names and renewed their lives.

New Testament name changes include Simon becoming Peter, *rock*; Saul, having experiencing the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, became Paul, humble. Lives renewed.

God continues to renew, to give us new names. If I were to paraphrase Isaiah's promise, it might read like this: 'No longer will you be called Lonely, Depressed, Guilty. Nor will your name be Anxious, Grieving or Violated. From now on, you will be called Healed, Forgiven, Comforted. Your name will be Healer, Companion, Friend.'

According to John's gospel, the inaugural public scene of Jesus' ministry is as a guest at a village wedding. Biblical scholars tell us that in a peasant village, like Cana, a wedding feast was the most festive event of the year and, for the hosting family, of their lives. It might go on for seven days. To run out of wine meant disgrace.

And the wine ran out. The wine can run out at the feast of life, sometimes gradually, sometimes suddenly. All that is desirable, joy-filled, can cease, because of illness, betrayal, disaster, death. Living in Beulah Land does not mean that wine will never run out.

But this wedding guest ensures quite a party, full-blown, drenched in wine. Some are uncomfortable about this aspect of the story: 'Don't tell teenagers...!' But the story is not about promoting excessive drinking. Jesus' parables reflect raw, uncensored, life; here a symbolic celebration is based on his village society in which wine was a staple. It says: 'Do you want to know what the life of Jesus is about? It's about a wedding party where wine never runs out, and people dance for joy.'ⁱⁱ

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us..." Such is the wonderful promise of Christmas and Epiphany: God comes into our homes and church where life is never perfect, where people are often forsaken and desolate. And, like Mary, we

can go to the One who can help us, and name the reality of the wine's running out. Such is the relationship, the delight, into which God invites us.

The new wine can be better than the old, made mature and rich by our tears, pain, prayers. It is the vintage of Beulah Land: the vintage of promise, of diversity, of a shared relationship with God.

'O to be in Beulah Land... /where all my night has passed away,' slaves sang, of life promised anew.

Perhaps that is why Mary seems to pester an at-first-unwilling Jesus. Wine runs out. The hosts - Mary's friends - face embarrassment and shame. But the wedding guest restores relationships.

That couple dashing down the aisle may forget, but we know: even at the wedding, wine can run out. Wine can run out at the feast of life, sometimes gradually, sometimes suddenly. All that is desirable and joy-filled can cease, because sudden pain or disaster. Living in Beulah Land does not ensure the wine will never run out.

Still: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us..." The wedding guest is with us, and he came 'singing love ... but for the love to go on we must make it our song...' (**VU 359**)

God comes into our world where life is never perfect, where people are forsaken and desolate. Like Mary, you can go to the One who can help. Like the servants, we can hear Jesus' command: fill empty jars with water. The wedding guest says, 'Listen. Fill the emptiness and wine may flow, the wine of listening to each other, caring for each other, reaching out to the world.'

Here, at Runnymede, the time for Annual reports has come: a time for looking back and looking forward: This year, can you imagine new wine, matured by tears, pain and prayers, the vintage of promise, yet to be tasted? Can you imagine taking on a new name, such as Beulah: *'Body of Christ'*, imagine this church enjoying the feast's abundance, holding it out, for all to savour, or imagine our church responding to the challenge of climate change in ways outlined by our Moderator's letter to the churches and to the Government of Canada, this week.

For now, as we've heard, it's time to respond to pain and crisis: to do what we can

to help. The United Church is joining with all Canadians of good will in the effort to respond generously and wisely to Haiti`s needs. May we may become aware that the One who loves the world is beside us, renewing us.

The wedding guest shows us the way.

Let us pray, in words offered by St. Augustine:

Keep watch, dear Lord,
with all who wake or watch or weep,
give your angels charge over all who sleep.
Tend the sick,
give rest to the weary,
sustain the dying, calm the suffering,
and comfort the distressed;
all for your love`s sake,
O Christ, our Redeemer. Amen.

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ⁱ *In a commentary in The Globe and Mail, Jan. 8, 2005.*

ⁱⁱ Biblical Scholar, Marcus Borg, in a seminar at Kirkridge Retreat Centre.